Workplace mental health priorities

A Morneau Shepell research group report

Employers increasingly understand the value of engagement and retention, and also understand the risk and cost of absence, presenteeism (being at work and not fully productive) and disability. Many, however, may not fully appreciate how profoundly workplace mental health impacts each of these issues. In addition, there is often a challenge of defining the priority areas of focus to support workplace mental health, and even of understanding what a mentally healthy workplace looks like.
Morneau Shepell's National Mental Health Survey

A 2014 national survey by Morneau Shepell tells a compelling story about the current state of mental health in Canadian workplaces. The purpose of the study was to provide data to employers regarding the current priority issues in workplace mental health, from the perspective of employees, physicians and other employers.

This new research validates the importance and impact of psychological health and safety in the workplace, and emphasizes the need for more focused efforts on specific areas of stigma.

Survey demographics

The survey, conducted in November and December of 2014, polled employees, employers and physicians across Canada. The survey was carefully designed to be representative of the Canadian population of employees (active in the workplace and not on leave), employers (human resource decision-makers) and physicians (general practitioners and psychiatrists).

The breakdown of the three groups of respondents is as follows:

**Employees (n=1,005)**
- 81% working full-time
- 12% working part-time
- 6% self-employed

**Employers (n=100)**
- 14% C-suite executives
- 41% vice-president/senior HR
- 38% HR manager
- 7% owner/principal

**Physicians (n=117)**
- 89% general practice
- 11% psychiatry

Margins of error
Valid 19 times of 20:
+/- 3.09% for employees
+/- 9.7% for physicians
+/- 9.8% for employers

Key findings on workplace mental health

- **33%** of working Canadians are now suffering or have suffered from a mental health condition, such as depression or an anxiety disorder.
- **27%** of employees surveyed report experiencing significant symptoms of stress.
- Employees overwhelmingly believe that workplace support can mitigate the impact of negative stressors.
- **90%** of employees believe that a mentally healthy workplace is a productive one.
- **99%** of physicians surveyed indicate that work issues have a role in the mental health issues they see on a regular basis.

Key findings on stigma related to mental health

- Despite increasing efforts to provide workplace support for mental health issues, the research shows that stigma remains a challenge.
- The types of stigma that are evident are those that can most significantly impact whether or not someone seeks care, remains at work, or returns to work following an illness-related absence. They include co-worker stigma, perceptions of stigma in the physician community and self-stigma (negative views of one’s self given a mental health condition).
- The employee respondents also showed a more negative view of individuals with mental illness when compared to the employer respondents.

A key finding of the survey indicates that employees firmly believe that several business objectives are directly related to whether the workplace is mentally healthy.

Mental health and workplace productivity

The majority of employees indicated that they recognize the business value in a mentally healthy workplace.

- **90%** of employees indicate that managing employee mental wellness is important for employee productivity.
- **87%** of employees believe that a mentally healthy workplace impacts the ability to meet business needs; only 56% indicate that their organization supports mental wellness on the job.
- **86%** of employees believe that a mentally healthy workplace positively impacts loyalty.
- **83%** of employees believe that a mentally healthy workplace positively impacts attraction and retention.

A majority of employees indicated that they have had personal mental health issues or some risk factors

The percentages highlighted in the charts represent employees who are actively at work, and do not include those employees who are off work on disability leave.
The impact of stress
83% of employees believe that how the workplace supports and responds to employees makes a difference in whether stress is seen as positive or negative.

This finding suggests an opportunity for employers to improve productivity, given the potential negative impact of stress on productivity, as well as other business objectives.

- 58% of employees indicate their productivity has been negatively impacted by stress at work.
- 45% of employees reveal they have thought about leaving their job due to workplace stress and its impact on them.
- 31% of employees have taken time off work because of workplace stress.
- 25% of employees indicate they have become ill in the last six months due to workplace-related stress.

Physicians indicate work issues play a role in mental health
Almost every physician answering the survey (99%) indicated that work issues have a role in the mental health concerns that they see on a regular basis. And 74% of physicians believe that the public health system is not equipped to deal with the number of work-related mental health issues that are emerging.

The physician perspective demonstrates the need for employers to promote the use of their existing health-related programs.

Stigma remains a major barrier to progress
More than 60% of people with mental health problems and mental illness won’t seek the help they need, and stigma is one of the primary reasons, according to the Mental Health Commission of Canada.¹

The Morneau Shepell national survey revealed that stigma creates fear, and fear is a powerful de-motivator that may impact returning to work after a disability leave, or staying at work while getting care:
- 65% of physicians cite fear as a major barrier for employees returning to work.
- Employees are afraid of what people will think of them (71%) and of losing career opportunities (77%) or even their job.
- 19% of employees indicate they believe that whether or not someone gets a mental illness is fully within their control; 12% of employers indicate that they believe this as well.
- Only 55% of employees and 65% of employers believe that mental health and physical health issues are treated the same way in their organization.

The issue of stigma is complex. There are many different areas where stigma is evident:

- 71% of employees express concern about workplace stigma around mental health, which is a barrier to staying at work or returning to work in a timely way.
- 65% of employees indicate self-stigma, which is a barrier to seeking care.
- 53% of employees believe they might experience stigma from their physician, which is also a barrier to care.

Of the employees who indicated having had a mental health issue:
- only 49% had sought care from their physician, and
- 16% did nothing.

Workplace psychological health and safety factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employees (%)</th>
<th>Employers (%)</th>
<th>Gap (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Wellness</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-Life Balance</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Safety</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth and Development</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Recognition</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Empowerment</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that employers have a 20% higher rating for respect in the workplace, a 17% higher rating for employee recognition, and a 15% higher rating for work-life balance than employees, all of which are factors in workplace stress.

**Employee and employer perceptions of workplace mental wellness differ**

The survey highlighted an interesting disconnect between employee and employer perceptions about how well the workplace was handling mental wellness, with the employers providing more favourable ratings of their workplace than employees. This is important for employers to consider, given that the correlation of lower personal stress, absenteeism, presenteeism and stigma for employees was based on the employees’ perceptions of each of the factors in their own workplaces.

**Mental health support in the workplace**

Workplace support is perceived as critical by employees and physicians to the impact of stress on employees and their productivity; workplace support includes co-worker support. The survey’s findings showed that employees sought out co-workers for support as often as professional counselling. While seeking support is positive, there is the identified concern regarding stigma among employees (co-workers).

**Physicians on support**

Physicians view social support as a key solution, rather than time off or reduced workload. When asked what employers could do to foster psychologically healthy workplaces,

- The number one recommendation among physicians was for employers to ensure better workplace communication and social support.  
- The number two recommendation was for employers to improve the availability of counselling and guidance.  

Physician comments related to social support included:

- be more communicative;  
- be more open to listening;  
- employ conflict resolution processes;  
- attempt to resolve or minimize interpersonal difficulties; and  
- recognize that severe depression is just as serious as any other major medical problem.

**Employees on workplace support**

Employee recommendations also focused on improved communication in the workplace and specific areas of social support, such as respect and validation. Employee comments included:

- communicate more, and not be a divided organization;  
- encourage communication with no repercussions; and  
- make it easier for employees to come forward and speak with management.

**Recommended actions for employers to improve workplace mental health**

The findings of this study indicate four major areas of opportunity for employers:

1. **Support a mentally healthy workplace through training of people managers.** People managers have significant influence over the type of communication and support that employees experience at work, including whether stress is perceived as negative or challenge-oriented.

2. **Educate employees directly to address the misinformation.** Misinformation can lead to self-stigma, self-imposed barriers to seeking care when needed and stigma from co-workers. Co-worker attitudes have significant influence. Support for anti-stigma in the workplace needs to directly address employees and not just people managers, particularly given that employees tend to have more stigmatizing views than employers.

3. **Assess employees’ perceptions of the factors of psychological health and safety in the workplace.** Employers tend to rate their workplaces more favourably than employees do for each factor. The real test of priorities within a particular workplace, however, rests with the perceptions of employees.

4. **Incorporate key metrics related to mental health in your workplace, in other business metrics.** Workplace mental health is aligned with key objectives, including retention, engagement, productivity and absence management. Any mental health strategy ultimately needs to be incorporated into a business strategy for any true benefits to be sustained.

For information about the survey, please contact: research@morneaushepell.com

For more information about Morneau Shepell services, contact info@morneaushepell.com or visit morneaushepell.com.

**About Morneau Shepell**

Morneau Shepell focuses on innovative solutions to deliver human resources and workplace health and productivity outcomes that help clients across North America better manage their costs and enhance the strength of their organizations. They are the leading provider of employee and family assistance programs, as well as the largest administrator of retirement and benefits plans, and the largest provider of integrated absence management solutions, in Canada.

© 2015 Morneau Shepell Inc.